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SUBJECT: PANAMA's MAY 2 ELECTORAL PROCESS: NUTS AND BOLTS

SUMMARY: General Elections

1. (U) Panama will hold general elections on Sunday, May 2 to elect a total of 1,756 new officials for five-year terms. Voters will elect a President, two Vice Presidents, 78 legislators (and 156 alternates), 75 mayors (and 150 alternates), 619 local representatives, 7 councilmen, 20 representatives to the Central American Parliament (PARLACEN) (and 20 alternates). Voting will start promptly at 7:00 a.m. and end at 4:00 p.m. Electoral officials have announced that preliminary national voting results should be available around 7:00 p.m. on May 2 (8:00 p.m. Washington time). Up to 1,999,553 registered voters will vote at Panama's 2,193 voting centers throughout the country. Up to 1,900 national and international observers, including 25-30 from the OAS, will be watching the polls on May 2.

2. (U) Panama has no mandatory voting law, no electronic voting, and no absentee voting. Panama holds General Elections every five years on the first Sunday in May. The President-elect is inaugurated and the Legislative Assembly holds its first session on September 1, 2004. End Summary.

Voters and Registration

3. (U) Panamanian law stipulates that all adult (at least 18 years-old) citizens of Panama may register to vote, provided they are within Panamanian territory and not detained, in jail awaiting trial or convicted. Panama's electoral code does not allow absentee voting for Panamanians residing overseas. Although voting is not mandatory in Panama, voter turnouts have been high in Panama's previous two general elections. In 1994, 73.7% of registered Panamanians voted; in 1999, 76.2% voted. Over 55% of Panama's registered voters are between the ages of 18 and 40.

4. (U) The Electoral Tribunal (ET) publishes the official and final electoral registry ("padron electoral") after purging duplicate records through careful review and computer proofreading. Registry entries include every voter's: (i) complete name, (ii) personal identification number (cedula), (iii) voting center (based on residence), and (iv) digital photo. The final electoral registry for Panama's May 2004 elections contains 1,999,553 registered voters. The ET has provided every political party a copy of the final list to maintain the transparency of the registration process.

Administrative divisions

5. (U) Panama is divided in nine provinces and seven indigenous reservations, which in turn are divided in 43 electoral districts. Each district elects a mayor, and, depending on population, between one and seven legislators. There are 78 total seats at stake in Panama's May 2, 2004 elections for its unicameral Legislative Assembly. Municipal Councils in each district include the mayor and local elected representatives.

6. (U) Residents of each "corregimiento" (group of neighborhoods) elect their local representative, known as the "representante de corregimiento." Representing the smallest administrative division, there are a total of 619 corregimientos in Panama, each with a separate representative. Representantes de corregimiento are vestiges of Panama's political system under dictator Omar Torrijos. Torrijos abolished the Legislative Assembly, forming an Assembly of Local Representatives (ALR) in its stead. Since the ALR no longer exists, Panamanian political analysts have called for eliminating the local representative position.

Political parties

17. (U) Panama has seven legally registered political parties: Partido Revolucionario Democrático (PRD), Partido Popular (PP), Movimiento Liberal Republicano Nacionalista (MOLIRENA), Partido Arnulfista (PA), Partido Solidaridad (PS), Partido Liberal Nacional (PLN) and Cambio Democrático (CD). To obtain Electoral Tribunal recognition, a party must register members totaling at least 4% of the number of votes cast for President during the most recent election. To survive a general election, an existing party must win at least 4% of the votes cast in presidential, legislative, or local representative balloting. All political parties must have a name, internal by-laws, government platform and a distinctive symbol (a flag). Panama's electoral law prohibits religious symbolism in political party flags.

Official Nominations

18. (U) Parties choose their candidates during primaries or a National Congress, Assembly or Convention, as stipulated by their internal by-laws. If a candidate dies or resigns, his/her first alternate automatically occupies the vacant candidacy. The opposition PRD was the only party that held primaries to select its candidates. The other six parties elected or nominated their candidates through a national congress or convention.

19. (U) After the Electoral Tribunal closed the official voter registry on December 31, 2003, Panama's electoral process officially began with political parties officially notifying ET of the candidates that they had nominated between January 2 and February 2, 2004. The process will end when the ET issues official electoral credentials to the winners. During the electoral process, the ET publishes an official electoral calendar by which all political parties and independent candidates must abide. Panama's electoral law states that only political parties can nominate candidates for President or Legislator. Independent candidates can run for mayoral and local representative seats.

Electoral calendar

10. (U) Panama's official electoral calendar consists of the following milestones:

---Oct. 15: Deadline for minors turning 18 years old before May 2 to renew their "cedulas" at the Electoral Tribunal.
---Oct. 30: Publication of tentative electoral registry ("padron electoral")
---Nov. 1-Nov 30: Term for political parties to challenge additions to the electoral registry
---Nov. 1: Deadline for appointed GOP officials (cabinet-level and above) who will run for elected positions to leave their current jobs.
---Dec 2: ET Officially convokes 2004 elections and swears-in National Vote-Counting Board
---Dec 2-Feb 2: Independent candidates register.
---Dec 2-Feb 7: Period to challenge independent candidacies.
---Dec 31: Deadline for Electoral Tribunal to reconcile electoral registry (e.g. removal of new prison inmates, latest death reports, etc.)
---January 2: Official initiation of electoral process
---Jan 2-Feb 2: Formal written nominations of candidates
---Feb 1: Deadline for political parties to formally inform the ET that they intend to participate in the electoral process
---Feb 2: ET Publishes final electoral registry ("padron electoral") and delivers it to political parties
---April 22: Last day to publish public opinion polls.
---April 26: ET officially takes control of Panamanian National Police (PNP). Control reverts to Ministry of Government & Justice once the ET officially proclaims the new President in a ceremony a few days after election day
---April 30: Last day for any kind of political campaigning and/or advertising. Last day for political talk shows to air on state-owned TV.
---May 1-3: All bars, clubs, cantinas, and liquor stores are closed. Sale and consumption of alcohol is prohibited.
---May 2: Election Day
 -6:00 a.m. Voting centers set up
 -7:00 a.m. Voting centers opened
 -4:00 p.m. Voting ends and counting begins
 -7:00 p.m. Exit poll results may be broadcast

Observers

¶11. (U) Close to 1,900 national and international observers will be visiting voting centers and counting boards on May 2. The largest group will be Panama's Catholic Church NGO Comision de Justicia y Paz, which will have 1,500 observers throughout the country. Panama's Ombudsman Office is coordinating the participation of close to 300 local observers and will host approximately 15 Latin American Ombudsmen who will also observe the elections. The Organization of American States (OAS), with USG financial support, will send a delegation of 25-27 VIPs. Foreign diplomats resident in Panama will also cover polling, but their presence will be limited. Embassy Panama will deploy approximately 30 observers to 12 different locations, 6 in metro Panama, and 6 outside the capital.

Voting

¶12. (U) Voting day procedures are well choreographed. After identifying themselves with personal ID cards (cedulas), Panamanians who vote on May 2 will each receive four ballots: one for President, one for legislator, one for mayor, and one for local representative. The ET is preparing 5,105 voting tables ("mesas de votacion"), located in 2,193 voting centers (usually public schools). Up to 500 voters will be registered at each table. Voting starts promptly at 7:00 a.m. and ends at 4:00 p.m. sharp, after which counting at each table immediately begins. Accompanied by representatives designated by each political party, electoral officials painstakingly review ballots one by one, calling out votes for each elected position.

Vote Counting

¶13. (U) Once counting has finished (about 1-1.5 hours after voting ends), volunteer electoral officials at each "table" enter results on a tally sheet (acta), spelling out figures to avoid confusion. Then, electoral officials and party representatives sign the tally sheet. Tally sheets are essential because there are no recounts in Panama. Once the tally sheet is completed and signed, electoral representatives burn the ballots while party representatives observe. The electoral representatives then take the tally sheet directly to the District Counting Board for computing after giving a copy to each party representative. District Counting Boards pass their results to their respective Provincial Counting Boards, which in turn transmit their results to the National Counting Board ("Junta Nacional de Escrutinio"), located by law in Panama City. (NOTE: Counting Board Members are usually CPAs and other professionals who have volunteered their services and received training and credentials from the ET. END NOTE.)

Poll Results

¶14. (U) Despite the laborious counting process, voting results will be quickly disseminated including the Electoral Tribunal website (www.tribunal-electoral.gob.pa). Electoral officials have announced that preliminary national voting results should be available around 7:00 p.m. on May 2 (8:00 p.m. Washington time). Rather than waiting to announce definitive results, electoral officials plan to broadcast results as they become available.

Security, sobriety, and ad-ban

¶15. (U) Panama's Electoral Code dictates that the ET controls the National Police on Election Day. Only on-duty policemen are authorized to carry weapons on Election Day. All political advertising and campaigning is prohibited after noon on April 30. Alcohol sales and consumption must cease between noon on May 1 and noon on May 3. On Election Day, while voters may wear hats or t-shirts with political symbols, distributing political propaganda is forbidden inside voting centers.

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